

Nordic Landscapes: Region and belonging on the northern edge of Europe. Minnesota.

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Abstract:

According to its editors, Nordic Landscapes was originally inspired by Michael Conzen's (1990) smart collection, *The Making of the American Landscape*, and conceived in the early 1990s after a series of meetings on landscape held in Denmark and Sweden. The project's incubation thus spans an important era in landscape studies from a time of “vibrant theoretical ferment” (Mitchell 2003, p. 789) in the late 1980s and 1990s to the present.

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For this collection of twenty-two essays about “the North” (Norden), the two distinguished editors, Jones and Olewig, make clear that they have not attempted to wrestle the contributions into any particular rigid theoretical approach to landscape. My interpretation of this statement is that there was no overarching agenda articulated to the authors, such as a desire to spark new ways of thinking about landscape or to reinvigorate landscape studies in English-language literature. If my interpretation is accurate, then the book fulfills what its title promises: a collection of essays about a variety of landscapes in a particular part of the world.

The contributions are eclectic—often delightfully so. They range from traditional historical geography (e.g., chapter 4 by Thorsteinsson on the evolution of land assignment in the Faeroe Islands) and applied landscape analysis (chapter 10 by Ihse and Skånes) to what I would characterize as critical geographies of identity (chapter 20 by Paasi) and domination (chapter 18 by Lehtinen) in Finland. Sørensen's chapter on perceptions of landscape in Nuuk, Greenland, is

filled with rich interview data and offers a wealth of insights into this relatively unknown place. It would be interesting to know if and how climate change and economic transition have changed perceptions of place and “nationhood” in Greenland in recent years (the data presented were collected in the late 1980s and again in the mid-1990s).

Nordic Landscapes is an attractive book replete with interesting maps, charts, and photographs. Lehtinen's image of a traditional Finnish jigsaw puzzle map featuring native fauna and showing a bear ominously approaching from Russia will be indelibly etched in my memory. A few of the organizational details of the book are somewhat curious. It concludes not with an editors' conclusion placing the preceding contributions in some sort of context and suggesting what the future might hold for Nordic landscapes and the study thereof but with two chapters providing a general descriptive overview of the human and physical geography of the region. Was this an afterthought? Is it a Nordic convention? Perhaps this material would be appropriate in an appendix or placed toward the beginning of the book, but it seems misplaced as the concluding section.

Then there is the matter of political geography. In a good illustration of just how difficult it is to think outside of the nation-state box, the book is more or less organized into sections by state unit: two chapters on Denmark, three on the islands of the North Atlantic, five on Sweden, and so forth. Meanwhile, the opening paragraph of the book invokes the increasing connections between local and global, as well as the supranational institutions of Europe, as creating new spaces for “regional place identities that had previously been suppressed under the political and ideological hegemony of the nation-state” (p. ix). This seemed to promise at least some examination of the transcendence of those national boxes. Are there any truly Nordic landscapes—ones that cross national borders—or just Danish landscapes, Finnish landscapes, and so on? Øresund, the region linked by a new bridge, comes to mind as a possibility, and it is mentioned in passing by several authors. For the most part, though, the idea of postnational landscapes is not addressed.

Along similar lines, a geographical irony kept recurring in my mind as I read the book. Although Norden has always been peripheral—lying “on the edge,” as the subtitle suggests, at the northern extreme of the northern hemisphere—even the periphery of Europe is being drawn into a fairly central role in the world. In a context of economic globalization, Sweden's and Finland's skillful negotiation of the global economy are well known, and widely respected, and often emulated. Meanwhile, debates on global climate change often focus on the disproportionate impacts in places above the Arctic Circle, whether on the traditions of the Saami in northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland or the implications of warming on Greenland. Resource geographies, including the exploitation of oil and gas reserves in the North Sea, further link Norden with global flows for better and worse. Each of these phenomena has implications for Nordic landscapes, presumably, yet there is scant mention of any of these global trends in the book. Insofar as the editors are clearly aware of global processes and linkages, the absence of a more sophisticated engagement with questions such as these seems curious.

Potential readers of *Nordic Landscapes* are most likely interested in two basic questions: what the book reveals about the landscapes of the Norden and what the essays taken together have to say about landscape studies more broadly. On the first count, this is an attractive, informative, rich source that contains an impressive range of topics. It is suitable as a standard reference work on the region's historical, natural, and cultural landscapes. On the second question, somewhat more is left to be desired. Our conceptual understanding of landscape has been greatly enriched and broadened during the rather protracted time frame from inception to publication of this volume, from landscapes as “ways of seeing” (Cosgrove 1998) to sites laden with material evidence of social and political power and repression (Mitchell 1996). By and large, the approaches in this collection do not advance the current state of theory on landscape. Yet this should not deter those interested in this particular region from having a look.

Notes

1. Norden, what we once learned as Scandinavia, is in fact a more expansive geographical view of the northern extremes of Europe. In this book, Norden stretches from Greenland in the west to Finland in the east, including Iceland and the Faeroe Islands.

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